

Society and Tradition

If society has real existence, it should naturally possess laws peculiar to it. If we accept the first theory about the nature of society (which we have already discussed) and reject the existence of society as a real entity, naturally we have to admit that society lacks laws which may govern it. And if we accept the second theory and believe in artificial and mechanical composition of society, then we would have to admit that society is governed by laws but that its laws are confined to a series of mechanical and causal relationships between its various parts, without the distinguishing features and particular characteristics of life and living organisms.

And if we accept the third point of view, we shall have to accept, firstly, that society itself has a comparatively more permanent existence independent of the existence of individuals although this collective life has no separate existence, and is distributed and dispersed among its individual members, and incarnates itself in their existence. It has discoverable laws and traditions more permanent and stable than those of the individuals, who are its components.

Secondly, we shall have to accept also that the components of society, which are human individuals, contrary to the mechanistic point of view, lose their independent identity—although in a relative fashion to produce an organically composite structure. But at the same time the relative independence of the individual is preserved because individual life, individual nature, and individual achievements are not dissolved totally in the collective existence.

According to this point of view, man actually lives with two separate existences, two souls, and two “selves.” On the one hand, there are the life, soul, and self of the human being, which are the products of the processes of his essential nature; on the other, there are the collective life, soul, and self which are the products of social life, and pervade the individual self. On this basis, biological laws, psychological laws, and sociological laws, together, govern human beings. But according to the fourth theory, only a single type of laws governs man, and these are the social laws alone.

Among the Muslim scholars `Abd al-Rahman ibn Khaldun of Tunisia was the first and the foremost Islamic thinker to discuss clearly and explicitly the laws governing the society in independence from the laws governing the individual. Consequently he asserted that the society itself had a special character,

individuality, and reality. In his famous introduction to history, he has discussed this theory in detail. Among the modern scholars and thinkers Montesquieu (the French philosopher of the eighteenth century A.D.) is the first to discuss the laws which control and govern human groups and societies. Raymond Aron says about Montesquieu.

His purpose was to make history intelligible. He sought to understand historical truth. But historical truth appeared to him in the form of an almost limitless diversity of morals, customs, ideas, laws, and institutions. His inquiry's point of departure was precisely this seemingly incoherent diversity. The goal of the inquiry should have been the replacement of this incoherent diversity by a conceptual order. One might say that Montesquieu, exactly like Max Weber, wanted to proceed from the meaningless fact to an intelligible order. This attitude is precisely the one peculiar to the sociologist. [1](#)

It means that a sociologist has to reach beyond the apparently diverse social forms and phenomena, which seem to be alien to one another, to reveal the unity in diversity in order to prove that all the diverse manifestations refer to the one and the same reality. In the same way, all the similar social events and phenomena have their origin in a similar sequence of analogous causes. Here is a passage from the observations on the causes of the rise and fall of the Romans.

It is not fortune that rules the world. We can ask the Romans, who had a constant series of success when they followed a certain plan, and an uninterrupted sequence of disasters when they followed another. There are general causes, whether moral or physicalwhich operate in every monarchy, to bring about its rise, its duration and its fall. All accidents are subject to these causes, and if the outcome of a single battle, i.e. a particular cause, was the ruin of a state, there was a general cause which decreed that that state was destined to perish through a single battle. In short, the main impulse carries all the particular accidents along with it. [2](#)

The Holy Qur'an explains that nations and societies qua nations and societies (not just individuals living in societies) have common laws and principles that govern their rise and fall in accordance with certain historical process. The concept of a common fate and collective destiny implies the existence of certain definite laws governing the society. About the tribe of Bani Israel, the Qur'an says:

وَقَضَيْنَا إِلَىٰ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ فِي الْكِتَابِ لَتُفْسِدُنَّ فِي الْأَرْضِ مَرَّتَيْنِ وَلَتَعْلُنَّ عُلُوًّا كَبِيرًا ۖ فَإِذَا جَاءَ وَعْدُ أُولَاهُمَا بَعَثْنَا عَلَيْكُمْ عِبَادًا لَنَا أُولِي بَأْسٍ شَدِيدٍ فَجَاسُوا خِلَالَ الدِّيَارِ وَكَانَ وَعْدًا مَفْعُولًا ۚ ثُمَّ رَدَدْنَا لَكُمُ الْكَرَّةَ عَلَيْهِمْ وَأَمْدَدْنَاكُمْ بِأَمْوَالٍ وَبَنِينَ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ أَكْثَرَ نَفِيرًا ۚ إِنْ أَحْسَنْتُمْ أَحْسَنْتُمْ لِأَنْفُسِكُمْ ۖ وَإِنْ أَسَأْتُمْ فَلَهَا ۚ فَإِذَا جَاءَ وَعْدُ الْآخِرَةِ لِيَسُوءُوا وُجُوهَكُمْ وَلِيَدْخُلُوا الْمَسْجِدَ كَمَا دَخَلُوهُ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ وَلِيُتَبِّرُوا مَا عَلَوْا تَتَبِيرًا ۗ عَسَىٰ رَبُّكُمْ أَنْ يَرْحَمَكُمْ ۚ وَإِنْ عُدتُمْ عَلَيْنَا وَجَعَلْنَا جَهَنَّمَ لِلْكَافِرِينَ حَصِيرًا

And we decreed for the Children of Israel in the scriptures: You verily will work corruption in the earth twice, and you will become great tyrants. So when the time for the first of the two came We roused against you slaves of Ours of great might who ravaged [your] country, and it was a threat

performed. ' [After you had regretted your sins and became pious again] Then we gave once again your turn against them, and we aided you with wealth and children and made you more in soldiery.

[Saying] *If ye do good, ye do good for your own souls, and if ye do evil, it is for them. (I.e. Our laws and customs are fixed and constant, it is by this covenant that people are bestowed with power, might, honour and constancy or subjected to humiliation and abjectness). So when the time for the second [of the judgements] came, because of your acts of tyranny and despotism, we aroused against you others [of our slaves] to ravage you, and to enter the temple even as they entered it the first time, and to lay waste all that they conquered with an utter wasting. It may be that your Lord will have mercy on you [if ye mend your ways], but if you repeat [the crime] we shall repeat [the punishment], and we have appointed hell a dungeon for the disbelievers.*

(17:4-8)

The last sentence, i.e. “**But if you repeat [the crime] we shall repeat [the punishment]**” shows that the Qur’an is addressing all the people of the tribe and not an individual.

It also implies that all the societies are governed by a universal law.

1. Raymond Aron, Main Currents in Sociological Thought, vol. I, p. 14.

2. Ibid.

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